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My Ping-Pong Paddling by Tennis Star Rafael Nadal

Columnist Ralph Gardner Jr. got a little advice on his game from Swedish table-tennis champion Malin Pettersson



14-time tennis Grand Slam champion Rafael Nadal also knows his way around a ping pong table. Watch as he and Toni Nadal, his uncle and coach, play ping pong against WSJ's Ralph Gardner Jr. and table tennis champion Malin Pettersson. Photo: Peter Foley

There is little chance I could win a point off Rafael Nadal in tennis. He's a 14-time Grand Slam tennis champion, even though he's in something of a slump at the moment, entering this week's U.S. Open seeded eighth.

But it turns out that in ping pong, where we faced off against each other Thursday evening in the courtyard of the New York Palace hotel, we're somewhat more evenly matched.

"Sometimes in tennis tournaments we have ping-pong tables in the players lounge," he explained. "And when I was a kid, we were always playing."

The beauty of ping pong, unlike tennis, is that you can quickly develop the unwarranted belief that you're talented.

"It's not very difficult at the beginning to hit the ball," Mr. Nadal agreed. "That's why everybody thinks they can play well at the beginning. But when you play with somebody that really practices it's impossible."

That's also true.

When I was invited to play against Mr. Nadal, known as "Rafa"—the event was a cocktail party in the tennis star's honor—I decided it might be wise to take a lesson first to reduce the potential for humiliation.

I was pretty good on the resort hotel circuit when I was 12. But that was about a half-century ago, and I haven't played much, or at all, since.

So I called up SPiN, a ping-pong club in Chelsea.

The club courteously arranged to have Malin Pettersson, a 14-time Swedish table tennis champion, give me a lesson.

Ms. Pettersson said she quickly disabuses SPiN's patrons, men in particular, of the notion they can defeat her. "I'm sure Nadal would think he could beat me," the ping-pong champ boasted. "No way."

SPiN, in the basement of a building on East 23rd Street, has a bar, lots of couches and, happily, ball boys who scooped up the results of my errant shots with equipment resembling the fishing nets that children use to catch crabs at the beach.

I played three games with Ms. Pettersson, who informed me that games these days are to 11 points rather than to 21 as they were in my era—and even took a few points off her. But that's only because she was humoring me.

When I asked her to play as she would against a professional opponent, there was so much spin and placement on the projectile I couldn't do much except watch it fly by.

She offered to accompany me to my match against Mr. Nadal. I agreed knowing I could use all the moral support I could get. Also, it would be cool showing us with a 14-time Swedish ping-pong champion in tow.

When the organizers heard I was traveling with a posse, they thought it would be fun if Ms. Pettersson and I played doubles against Rafa and Toni Nadal, his coach and uncle.

It was a wise move. Because if I'd had to face Rafa alone—as pleasant and even self-effacing as he seemed to be—he'd probably have died of boredom. Toni Nadal also appreciated the human backboard that Ms. Petersson provided for his shots.

Also, I'm not used to performing in front of crowds, in ping pong or anything else.

And there were at least a couple of hundred people clicking photographs of the tennis star and Tommy Hilfiger underwear model on their cellphones, as waiters served pigs in blankets on trays decorated with sneakers and tennis ball-shaped cake lollipops.

Toni Nadal, astute coach that he is, quickly perceived my lack of talent—it helped his diagnosis that I frequently whiffed the ball, though I attribute that to nerves—and compassionately suggested we warm up together while Rafa and Ms. Pettersson did the same, as if we were preparing to play a doubles tennis match.

I'm relieved to report that while Rafael Nadal is one of the greatest clay-court tennis players in history, that talent doesn't totally translate to a ping-pong table. "Not at all," Rafa admitted.

Ms. Pettersson described his ping-pong game as cautious.

However, the tennis great said, "I always believed that practicing as many sports as you can helps to become a better sportsman in general. So I was playing football when I was a kid; ping pong the same."

I even managed to get off a couple of smashes at the champ's expense, even though we didn't keep score. That helped calm my nerves, redeem a speck of self-esteem and, most important of all, will allow me to boast in perpetuity that I won two points against Rafael Nadal. Though not in his best sport.

— ralph.gardner@wsj.com

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/my-ping-pong-paddling-by-tennis-star-rafael-nadal-1440982530>



Rafael Nadal and Ralph Gardner Jr. after facing off in table tennis. PHOTO: PETER FOLEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL